

Police and the Community; We Are in This Together

Do you have the time to read this? Do you care about your community? Do you care about the community's relationship with the police? We have all heard the saying "perception is reality", and in many instances that is what we believe to be true. As a police officer the perception of "us against them" has always been a stigma that has to be overcome. People often make a general statement about all officers based on one or two encounters with an officer. As a community we are all in this together and each person has a role to play to make our quality of life what we deserve. Police Officers are by their training authoritative and expected to take charge of a situation. This can sometimes be perceived by the public as being aggressive, rude, or disrespectful. But, the officer is acting to take steps that are necessary to provide safety, resolve an issue, or prevent chaos. Even then they must treat each person with dignity and respect. Let us break down that term so often associated with police, "serve and protect". I view *service* as the ability to aid someone and respond to their request for assistance, and *protect* is to take proactive measures to insure safety and identify potential dangers.

So how do we break down the perception? Law Enforcement personnel have to be constantly reminded that we serve the public. Police work is not just about writing tickets, making arrests, or having to subdue a combative person. It is also about helping those in need; being able to recommend a solution when we can; being a positive influence and role model to our young people; and maintaining the support and respect of the community. These four areas alone are demanding and require a partnership between the police and the public. The police have to do their part, and so too does the community.

There is a saying that police work is hours of boredom accented by moments of excitement. During those routine hours we have the opportunity to truly influence and build on our relationship with the community, and during those moments of excitement we respond in the fashion we have been trained. If there is any grey area in law enforcement it is in the area of discretion. An officer must decide what action to take; issue a warning, issue a citation, or make an arrest. This does not only apply to traffic offenses, but all adversarial encounters with the police. The officers discretion is not to be taken lightly. Documentation and report writing are also requirements. We do not like all the paperwork and reports, but it is a part of the job and they have to be accurate, well written, and concise. Your police department reaches out to the community in various methods; frequent walk-thru's at our schools, walk-thru's at our community centers, bike patrols on the greenway and at community events, child passenger seat programs, drug take back programs, bicycle registration, public presentations, media interviews, newspaper articles, website information, fingerprinting services, foot patrols in downtown square area, the citizen's academy and others. These events are not intended to be adversarial in nature, but a service to our community, an opportunity to prevent crime and to interact with our citizens.

It is during the other encounters that tend to contribute to the perception. Can you imagine what our society would be like if there were no rules about how we interact with each other? What would our roads be like if there were no regulations to govern the operation of vehicles? Or, take it to a more personal level, how would your family fare with no rules? Because of the necessity for rules the

police are needed. So the requirement for traffic enforcement, proactive crime detection measures, and crime prevention education are necessary. Now that we know the police are necessary, what is the method of enforcement? Under our system of justice, we operate under the premise of "Rule of Law". This means, in simple terms, that no person is above the law and all are subject to society's rules and regulations. The converse side of that would be the "Rule by Law". In this sense, the rulers or people in charge make the laws and exempt themselves. Under our "Rule of Law", WE are all subject to the laws and regulations of our society.

Let us look at the unfortunate but true fact that there are people in our society that do not like the police - what we do, or what we stand for. This is evident by over 23,000 law enforcement deaths since statistics have been kept in the late 1700's. In 2013 alone, one hundred twenty three officers were killed in the line of duty. During interactions officers must always be on their guard and practice critical officer survival skills. These skills may often be perceived by the public as aggressive. However, as the Chief of Police, my concern is that each officer returns safely to their families when their shift is over. Officers must use those officer survival skills and apply them in a manner that permits them to deal respectfully with the public.

After thirty-two years of law enforcement service, I know that police work is a noble profession and worthy of the community's support. We, as a society, expect officers to be enforcers of the law, pharmacists, marriage counselors, mediators, and jack-of-all-trades. We expect the officers to make split second decisions, and be right all the time. As Police managers we must ensure officers are properly trained, have proper equipment, and have clear policy and procedures to govern what is expected, how it is to be done, and how to document what was done. This is all for the officer's protection because they will surely be second guessed, Monday morning quarterbacked, and scrutinized in the courts and by the media. Police executives, supervisors, and officers must all work together to maintain fiscal restraint and learn how to do more with what we have, work faster, work better, and do it cheaper. Our officers earn a salary far below what is deserved. We struggle to keep our dedicated employees because other professions without danger, overtime, court appearances, or training requirements outside duty hours, will pay more and with much less stress and conflict. So with everything described, a police officer signs on to do a job with the understanding there will be adversarial encounters, time away from family, demands of the job, and low pay. But in spite of all this, we have all taken an oath to protect, defend, serve, and conduct ourselves in a manner that brings credit to ourselves, the City, and our chosen profession. As the Chief of Police, it is my job to ensure these affirmations are accomplished.

What can the community do to enhance our partnership? First, understand what is described above and the perspective of the officer. If you have an encounter with an officer, whether a public assist, a traffic violation, or any other event, you deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. Second, understand that the encounter with the police may be the result of your own action. Did you run a red traffic signal, stop sign, speed, have an accident, have an equipment violation, or get involved in a disturbance. Third, reach out to the police and get to know them. We receive many invitations to attend dinners, activities, and public display of thanks. Be a part of that. Fourth, there is an avenue to report any incident in which you feel an officer did not perform as expected. The department has a

complaint process. All complaints are heard, examined and acted on. The Chief of Police determines the investigating officer and the extent of the review. A formal complaint requires a signed complaint with information concerning the incident. A formal complaint by a citizen always receives a letter at the conclusion of the investigation. An informal complaint is handled through the officers supervisor or the division commander. Each officer has an immediate supervisor that holds the rank of Sergeant. Each Sergeant works for a Lieutenant and each Lieutenant reports to the Chief of Police. Each complaint looks at the situation and determines if there is a violation of policy and what corrective action is necessary. Fifth, when you see an officer out and about in the community just tell them thanks for what they do. We all know how we feel when someone takes the time to tell you thank you for your service.

The citizens of Tullahoma are fortunate to have a group of officers that understand the motto of "serve and protect". Do we have bumps in the road? Sure, we are human, we make mistakes. The "thin blue line" describes the role of your police department to prevent chaos in our society. We all have a part to play, together we can continue to have a quality of life we expect, and deserve. As the Chief of Police, I work for you - the community. If you have any questions, concerns, suggestions, or comments, I can be reached at (931) 455-0530, or pblackwell@tullahomatan.gov.